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This is a thoroughly American book and should be treated as such. For me, the most interesting parts of Mary R. Sawyer’s book were the sections where it described the development of Christian communities throughout American history. These include, obviously, the influence of the South American Catholicism within groups living in the USA and the evangelization of the Native American peoples, but Sawyer also traces the forms of Christian faith brought in by other immigrant communities, the faith of slaves and their effects on growing populations in different areas of the United States. The detailed description of this process gives our understanding of American history more depth and provides important insights into cultural and social processes which have formed, and which continue to form, the values and ideals of the American people. Thus the religious history of the people of the United States is a varied and complex map, in which syncretistic accommodations, side-by-side adaptations, and sometimes simply massacring people, have had a part to play. I was jolted by the idea, for example, that many Native American groups can describe themselves as ‘post-apocalypse communities’. The end time has happened for their culture and spirituality. They can tell us what that feels like.

However, Sawyer has a particular purpose in going into so much detail, since she wants to argue that it is from small, marginalized communities that authentic Christian faith is nurtured and can bloom. Thus American religious history is also about the formation of such small marginalized communities, which arise through particular experiences of culture, background or ethnic origin and which develop boundaries sheltering the oppressed in the face of the ‘imperial’ Church. This argument is backed up by numerous examples of small Christian groups living community in such a way as to provide alternative theologies, alternative ecclesial models, missiological understandings or pictures of Christian living, all of which in some way challenge the institutional church. Such groups are often much more active and focused in terms of social justice than the overarching Church machinery within which they reside. An example would be groups living under *mujerista* liberation theology.

In this book, the Church as institution looms like an evil spectre. It is a machine far from the intentions of Jesus himself, since it is powerful, patriarchal and authoritarian. The image is presented of Jesus as ‘accompanier’ of marginalized peoples, commuting his own vulnerability into their experience. The dominating Church’s ecclesiological understanding is self-determining and therefore small
marginalized groups of Christians define themselves against it by being whatever it is not. Sawyer sees this as being especially true of the Roman Catholic Church which she sees as living out a schizophrenic existence of spirit-filled communities operating within an overarching and inflexible order. Inevitably perhaps, the latter part of the book is dedicated to exploring the Christian communities of women, and gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals (glbt) whose stories cannot be told within their mainstream Christian traditions or who are silenced within the Church’s machine.

Sawyer acknowledges from the beginning that the term ‘community’ is a difficult and slippery animal. Her working definition is as follows:

*Christian community [is] a group of people coming together with intentionality to live the gospel values of inclusiveness, justice and caring in order to create a transformed world.* (p. 16)

From a missiological point of view this is simply not enough, however. For example, the five marks of mission are:

*To proclaim the good news of the kingdom.*
*To teach, baptise and nurture new believers.*
*To respond to human need by loving service.*
*To seek to transform unjust structures of society.*
*To respect the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the earth.*

If we compare Sawyer’s community signifiers with the five marks of mission, we can see that her communities have a particular political agenda which is about transforming the structures which have made them marginalized. Justice issues therefore predominate, and many of the examples she cites have at their core restitution, or acknowledgement of oppression or silencing. The tension here, then, is whether the witness to Christ which such communities offer is to a gospel for everyone, or a gospel which is received and known only in this community and in this way, out of this very particular history or experience. Moreover, it is not clear how such witness provides for evangelism to people outside the parameters of the specific groups or how the communities ever become outward facing enough to address global issues of the place of the Christian faith in creation. These questions are of particular relevance to any of us who are interested in the *Mission-shaped Church* agenda, since there are ongoing questions in both missiology and ecclesiology about whether homogeneous groups can ever effectively model Church.

Whether intentional or not, one of the pressing questions which emerge from the book is whether Christianity itself is the problem. I found myself wondering what I was actually reading about – the history of America as an imperialist state